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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: CHALLENGE FOR NEW JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION:

SUMMARY

1. (U) The Ministry of Social Development has approved the registration of Oman's first journalism association. Under the purview of the Ministry of Information (MOI), the association has been received with considerable skepticism by journalists. Its purpose is to strengthen recognition and respect of Omani journalists abroad, as well as to provide training seminars and advocacy services at home. The association will be formally launched in March by its new chairman and close MOI ally, Ali bin Khalfan al-Jabri. End summary.

BIG HELP OR BIG BROTHER?

2. (U) On November 22, the Ministry of Social Development approved the registration application of Oman's first journalists' association. The Omani Journalist Association (OJA), which took 2 years to win government approval, is currently headed by Ali bin Khalfan al-Jabri, a close friend and associate of Information Minister Hamad al-Rashdi. In a meeting on December 6 with PAO and Poloff, al-Jabri said that the formation of the OJA is a necessary step to promote the professional recognition and integrity of Omani journalists abroad, as well as to advocate on behalf of journalists in Oman. To illustrate his point, Al-Jabri said that the association had already been contacted about assisting an unnamed Omani journalist who was having problems with a local paper. The 12 appointed members of the board of directors meet weekly to discuss the OJA's course of action now that it has been approved. Issues include where to site its offices, establishing sustainable funding and membership, and publishing the OJA's mission and objectives.

3. (U) Mr. al-Jabri, in conjunction with his Marketing Manager Al-Wadhah al-Mawali, said that there has been considerable interest in the development of the organization and that its activities are being closely watched by "others." The association has also received calls from journalists, students, and teachers interested in obtaining membership. Al-Jabri said that while the details of membership costs and privileges are not yet determined, membership will be available to students, professors, and all journalists working in Oman. With the grand launch in March, the OJA expects a significant increase from its current membership of fifty. In an effort to grow regionally, al-Jabri said that the OJA hopes to work with Egyptian and Kuwaiti journalists' associations as well as reach out to membership in larger international journalists' organizations.

4. (U) In an interview with a UAE newspaper, former IV participant and journalist Rafia Salman Al Talei opined that the association was "toothless" and charged that "none of the so-called NGOs here are working independently and the latest association will be another such institution. . . it has taken more than three years for the government to accept a request to register (it). . . it won't be an independent body."

COMMENT: HORNS OF A DILEMMA

5. (SBU) The OJA faces the unenviable challenge of trying to fulfill two widely divergent aspirations. To the government, and under Omani law, the association is supposed to facilitate communication between the Information Ministry and the journalistic profession (primarily from the former to the latter), and be a "non-governmental" representative of Oman at international fora. Journalists, however, want an association that can win them greater independence. The degree to which the OJA can appease both perspectives will likely determine how enduring and meaningful the association will be.

6. (SBU) The appointment of al-Jabri, a well-known government newscaster and close, personal friend of the Minister of Information has gotten OJA off to bad start with journalists.

Several sources termed al-Jabri the Minister's "personal bidder." Al-Jabri counters these criticisms by reminding journalists that a new board of directors will be elected by members next year.

17. (SBU) Contributors to Oman's Internet message board Al-Sabla are also less than inspired by the association's promises, suggesting instead that the formation of the OJA is "just for show" as the Omani press attempts to counter recent complaints of censorship and journalist bans. Journalists also argue that an association at the beck-and-call of the Ministry of Information is simply another mechanism of controlling the press, rather than advocating on its behalf.
BALTIMORE